

Hidden truths

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There are 15,000 lobbyists in Brussels trying to influence the political decision-making processes and policy. That is fair enough – they are entitled to do that – and politicians are quite able to decide if or to what extent they agree on the analysis, demands and suggestions of lobbyists.

Recently though, lobbyists have started to resort to more underhand measures to influence politicians.

The pharmaceutical industry in particular is acting in an increasingly subtle manner: it is playing on the fears of patients and taking advantage of them in order to serve its own interests, such as the approval of drugs, free access to them and research funding.

Many so-called ‘patient initiatives’ recommend the prescription of certain medications rather than tackling the question of alternative medication that might have the same effect or fewer adverse effects.

Furthermore, they never address the question of overpriced drugs. For example, one academic study by the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and which received substantial funding from Roche concludes that survival rates of cancer patients improve if they have access to new cancer drugs, even though surviving cancer is widely recognised as being more likely to occur if the cancer is detected and tumours are removed at an early stage.

The Swedish report has been widely criticised for its conclusions, but this did not stop patient groups from organising a Europe-wide campaign – also funded by Roche – based on the results of this study.

That campaign earned the patient group set up with Roche funding, Cancer United, and the PA firm Weber Shandwick the dubious honour of second prize in the worst EU lobby awards in 2006.

Because of bad examples like this, the European commission took the initiative to push for greater transparency, and the parliament has welcomed this move.

MEPs will vote this month on the Stubb report on lobbying in the European institutions, and are expected to back calls for a comprehensive and mandatory register of lobbyists, to include civil society and NGOs such as patient groups, that will oblige them to disclose

their financial backers.

It was as a result of just such a disclosure that the European parliamentary group on breast cancer (EPGBC), an informal working group of parliamentarians, decided in April to end its cooperation with Europa Donna, the European coalition against breast cancer.

Around 86 per cent of Europa Donna's income in 2007 came from the pharmaceutical industry, although the NGO had always denied this. Other evidence for the strong link between Europa Donna and the pharmaceutical industry was the invitation offered to one of the authors of the Karolinska study to the NGOs European conference in Amsterdam in 2007 in order to promote the research without offering a platform to any critics of the research.

Furthermore, Europa Donna's strategic plan for 2007 was based on a review conducted by Boston Consulting Group and written by an individual who works chiefly for the pharmaceutical industry – as a result of which the plan focused mainly on opportunities for increased funding and lobbying.

As a result, we parliamentarians engaged in the fight against breast cancer came to the conclusion that Europa Donna no longer had patients' interests at heart.

Of course, it is not easy for patient groups to collect the amount of funding they need to maintain their daily work. Unfortunately, most companies prefer to support emotional subjects and other striking topics, and the offer of support from pharmaceutical companies is very tempting.

However, patient initiatives should be aware that in accepting this offer, they lose their credibility among politicians and that can harm their interests. It is possible to work in a credible, active and successful way against breast cancer without being sponsored by the pharmaceutical industry.

The example of Europa Donna Germany proves that: it has refused to accept any money from the pharmaceutical industry – but its credibility has been seriously damaged by the actions of the European umbrella organisation.

The case of Europa Donna shows that we need a new political culture concerning the funding of independent associations. The EPGBC has taken a brave step and I hope that other patient groups will become more aware of this problem and try to avoid the minefield of sponsorship from the pharmaceutical industry.

Infos zum Weiterlesen:

„Notbremse gezogen – Unser Rücktritt vom EUROPA DONNA Vorstand in Deutschland“:
<http://www.bcaction.de/wordpress/?p=1585>

Berichterstattung im BMJ: MEPs shun cancer advocacy group because of industry funding
<http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/336/7651/980-a?etoc>

